

The United States, The Russian Federation and the Challenges Ahead

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Chairman Corker, Ranking Member Senator Menendez, thank you for this invitation to testify before the United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations (SFRC). It is an honor to be here. We are here to discuss an urgent topic: US policy toward Russia.

Not surprisingly, at the start of a new administration there is much talk about a new effort to reach out to Moscow and to start a dialogue. This was true at the start of George W. Bush's Administration and Barack Obama's.

Given the current difficulties in U.S.-Russian relations, this interest makes a good deal of sense. Russia is a great power with a proud history, the world's largest country in terms of territory, and a player of influence in Europe, East Asia and the Middle East. Russia possesses the world's second most powerful military: a nuclear arsenal comparable to ours and conventional forces that are easily the most powerful in Europe. While its economy is stagnant and hit hard by the low prices of oil and natural gas, it is still the 12th largest in dollar terms. We cannot simply dismiss Russia as a declining and regional power. We would do that at our peril.

It makes great sense for our government to have meaningful discussions and meetings with Russia this year. We have much to discuss with the Kremlin. First we would like to make sure that our relationship does not deteriorate further. The most urgent matter concerns Moscow's current practice of flying warplanes dangerously close, and at times without their transponders on, to American and other NATO planes and ships. Such incidents risk fatal accidents and even a clash between the U.S. and Russia. We need to re-establish substantive communication between our two militaries in order to avoid such incidents, and when they occur, to move toward de-confliction.

If our initial communication and/or cooperation is successful then more senior dialog may be warranted. A summit would permit us to see if there is a basis for cooperation on a number of global issues of possible interest to both of us. That should start with a subject that has been at the heart of relations between Washington and Moscow for over half a century: nuclear disarmament. This area has been dormant since the first Obama Administration. Equally important, especially for President Trump, is potential joint action against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and other Salafi extremists.

The problem here is that thus far Moscow's extensive military operation in Syria has devoted little attention to these extremists. It has instead been directed against the weak moderates whom we support and lately, as it works with Ankara, against the Kurds. And its indiscriminate bombing against civilian populations has fueled refugee flows, exacerbating the refugee crisis in Europe. Moscow's principal objective in Syria is to shore up the weak, yet savage, Assad regime. If we back off active opposition to Assad – a serious concession to Mr. Putin -- is Moscow willing to be a real partner in Syria and beyond against Islamic extremists?

Another area to explore is Iran. Moscow has been an active partner of Iran in Syria. As we saw recently, Iran even provided Russian warplanes a base for a brief period of time; yet at the same time it worked with us and others in persuading Tehran to sign the agreement on its nuclear program. The Trump Administration has indicated that it wants to take a second look and improve the terms of that agreement. Is Moscow willing to partner on this? Or does it prefer good relations with Tehran at the expense of stability in the Persian Gulf?

This is by no means a complete list -- space exploration and counter-narcotics are among the other areas where we can cooperate. But all these issues point to the important business we can do when US and Russian interests overlap.

We must not, however, be naïve. There are a number of critical areas where Moscow is challenging US interests, including vital ones. As the Supreme Allied Commander in Europe, I had a ringside seat for three years watching Moscow do just that.

President Putin has made clear that he wants to upend the post-Cold War order established in Europe. He and senior Russian officials have justified aggression in Ukraine by claiming a right to protect ethnic Russians and Russian speakers there; and they have said that this principle applies elsewhere. Their goal is to weaken NATO, the European Union, and the Transatlantic relationship.

The peace that we established in Europe in 1945, and that we reinforced at the end of the Cold War in 1989, has been the basis of the unprecedented security and prosperity that we have enjoyed for the past twenty-five years. It put an end to the unbridled great power rivalries that gave us World Wars I and II, the most destructive wars in human history. We have a vital interest in maintaining a strong NATO and vibrant Europe.

Over the past nine years, the Kremlin has committed multiple acts of aggression: in Georgia in 2008; in Crimea in early 2014; and since then an ongoing not-so-covert war in Ukraine's East. It has agreed to two ceasefires – Minsk I and II – and violated each repeatedly.

And Moscow has intimated, by actions and statements that if it succeeds in Ukraine, there will be future targets. Those targets may include our NATO allies, Estonia and Latvia, where ethnic Russians comprise 25 percent of the population.

We have a vital interest in stopping Moscow's revanchist policies before they move to other countries, and especially our NATO allies in the Baltics. While we conduct a dialogue with Moscow, we need to strengthen NATO's presence in the Baltic states and other eastern members of the Alliance. The Trump Administration should endorse the decisions taken at the Warsaw NATO summit last summer to do just that. It should reaffirm our Article 5 commitment to defend each NATO member under threat; and it should take the lead in enhancing NATO capacities to deal with hybrid war – the appearance of disguised Russian agents or little green men – in Allied countries.

To underscore our commitment to the Alliance, it would make sense for the President to meet first with his NATO colleagues before seeing President Putin.

And the Trump Administration, which understands the value of negotiating from strength, should adopt a position of forward defense in dealing with the Kremlin challenge to NATO. It should fully support Ukraine against Kremlin aggression. The Obama Administration was reluctant to provide Ukraine with the defensive weapons necessary to better defend itself. The new team can do better than that.

It is also essential to provide Moscow no free passes in its war on Ukraine. Our and Europe's economic sanctions – which cost the Russian economy 1-1.5 of GDP in 2015 – were imposed as an incentive for Moscow to meet its Minsk commitments and withdraw from Ukraine's East, and as a deterrence against additional aggression. It would be a sign of weakness to ease those sanctions for anything less than Moscow's full compliance with Minsk. The more trouble the Kremlin has conducting its war in Ukraine, the less likely it is to cause trouble for us with our eastern NATO partners.

We must also ramp up substantially our cyber defenses to withstand the nasty operations that the Kremlin has been conducting against us and others. We also need to consider how we can respond to future cyber-attacks in ways – perhaps not public – that discourage them from continuing such practices. Doing that might persuade them to enter a serious dialogue on avoiding cyber confrontations.

A dialogue with Moscow is possible, as is cooperation on certain important issues. But we should not be fooled by that prospect to surrender either our principles or our interests. We should enter that conversation with good faith and respect, but also from a position of strength. That is the way to achieve agreements that serve our interests, and that last.